

REBECCA AFFACHINER  
THE BETSY ROSS of ISRAEL

AN EXHIBITION  
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by RABBI DAVID  
GEFFEN, PH.D.  
TEMPLE ISRAEL  
SCRANTON,  
PENNSYLVANIA

The ancestral home of the Affachiners, the town of Nezvizh, Poland, was owned by the Radziwill family, whose descendant married the sister of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Nezvizh is located in the present Belarus. In 1589, a ruling member of the family granted the local Jews rights to engage in commerce but not in agriculture. The Jews in the town were needleworkers, tanners, and barbers. Some were engaged in market gardening, textiles, the sale of lumber, and a cooperative Jewish bank.

Nezvizh was a center for Talmudic scholars. Its chief rabbi in the mid 19th century was Isaac Elhanan Spektor. Later he was chosen as the chief rabbi of Kaunas (Kovno). He was so renowned that the rabbinical school at the Yeshivah University in New York bears his name. There was a fine yeshivah, a Hebrew school and a Yiddish school in Nezvizh. Young Jews interested in moving to Palestine could receive training at a local farm operated by a pioneering Zionist organization. Tragically, five thousand Jews resident there were slaughtered by the Nazis and collaborators in 1939, and the remaining 1,000 Jews of Nezvizh were hacked to death in the ghetto in 1942. After World War II, no attempt was made to reconstitute the Jewish community.

*Rebecca  
Affachiner on  
leave in Cannes,  
Passover, 1919*

Rebecca Affachiner was born in Nezvizh in 1884, the daughter of Isaac and Fanny Y. Affachiner. Her father went to the United States first and then brought the family to New York in 1891. Educated on the East Side of New York, where her family lived, she participated actively in the multifaceted program of the Educational Alliance on











AFFACHINER  
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GRADUATE OF  
THE JEWISH  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY  
OF AMERICA.

East Broadway and later trained as a social worker in the New York School of Philanthropy.

From 1904 until 1907, Rebecca studied in the Teachers Course of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. At this same period, Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, was a student in the Rabbinical School of the Seminary. In March 1912 Rebecca was invited to the inaugural meeting of Hadassah in New York City. Rebecca's copy of that invitation was placed in the cornerstone of the Hadassah Hospital building in Jerusalem in 1958.

Rebecca became quite friendly with the Chancellor of the Seminary, Solomon Schechter, and his wife Mathilde. After becoming the first woman graduate of the Seminary in June 1907, Rebecca went to work as the superintendent of the Columbia Religious and Industrial School for Jewish Girls, an innovative educational institution on the East Side. She worked at the school for ten years. Mathilde Schechter, President of the School, wrote that "Rebecca Affachiner brings with her knowledge and Jewish spirit, eagerness to do her duty in a pleasing sympathetic manner." During this time, Rebecca also founded the Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister Movement in Manhattan.

Volunteering as a War Worker in the summer of 1918, Rebecca was accepted by the Jewish Welfare Board to serve under its jurisdiction. Upon completion of a training course conducted at Barnard College, she was shipped overseas in January 1919 to work with the American Jewish soldiers of the 77th Regiment at the embarkation center in LeMans, France.

Based in her own Jewish Welfare Board hut, Rebecca performed manifold duties including serving cookies and chocolates to several hundred men each night and dancing with as many as her feet would allow. She sewed on their chevrons, chose gifts for their sweethearts, and corresponded with their parents. She arranged the celebration of Lincoln's and Washington's birthdays and planned and orchestrated a *Seder* (Passover meal) for 350 men.

*The Affachiner family, New York, ca. 1893. Isaac and Fanny Affachiner with their children (left to right) Rebecca, Max, Lillian, and Annie*



As an angel of mercy, Rebecca regularly visited hospitals and camps in the area, distributing stationery and sweets, always with a friendly smile. In May 1919, she welcomed the Commander in Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces, General John J. Pershing, on his visit to the J.W.B. hut in LeMans. At the end of the month, Rebecca spoke at the Memorial Day Observance, addressing the civilian and military audience in English and French. She received a special gift bracelet from the French government after her address.

The cape that she wore during her tour of duty in World War I was featured, in the last quarter of 1988, at an exhibition held at the Museum of the Historical Society of Connecticut in Hartford, Connecticut. Rebecca was cited as one of the notable women in twentieth-century Connecticut state history because of her service from 1920 to 1926 as superintendent of the United Hebrew Charities in Hartford.

While in that city, she reorganized Jewish social service in the community, turning the United Hebrew Charities into a casework agency. An active Zionist, she helped plan the community meeting marking the visit of Chaim Weizmann and Albert Einstein in the spring of 1921. Elected to the local board of the Traveler's Aid Society, Rebecca was one of the leaders of the public protest against the increase in streetcar fares. In 1923, the mayor of Hartford appointed her a Juvenile Commissioner of the city, a position she held with distinction during her three-year term.

After leaving Hartford, Rebecca visited Palestine in the summer of 1926, praying at the Western Wall, *Kotel*, on Tisha B'Av and touring all the colonies in Emek Yizrael in the northern part of the country. Returning to the United States, she worked briefly as a field worker for Hadassah and then campaigned for the election of Al Smith as President of the United States. From 1929 until December 1933, Rebecca was the Director of Social Services for the National Council of Jewish Women in Norfolk, Virginia. There she established the Council House, the first community facility of its type in that



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HOSPITAL.

southern city. As advisor of the local Junior Hadassah, Rebecca became very friendly with Anna Birshstein, later Anna Birshstein Geffen. Anna received a gift from her of a set of High Holiday Prayerbooks with handcarved wooden covers made by the artisans of the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem.

Rebecca sailed for Palestine in January 1934, thus making *aliyah*, moving to the Holy Land at the age of 50. After settling in Jerusalem, her first project was the establishment of a crippled children's hospital there, now known as Alyn. She was especially sensitive to this problem since she herself was lame. Because of her deep love of music, she attended, in 1934, the initial concert of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (now the Israel Philharmonic) conducted by Arturo Toscanini. In the late 1930s, she directed her energies to helping Rumanian Jewry, travelling to that country twice, at her own expense, to get a firsthand picture of the situation.

Her second visit to Rumania was in August 1939, the month when World War II was declared. Despite the tension, Rebecca worked feverishly to establish a mechanism by which young Rumanian Jews could go to Palestine. Her brief diary of that trip included these entries:

AUGUST 11, 1939—meeting with Zionist officials here in Bucharest, trying to activate a plan to allow the maximum number of youth to leave and travel directly to Palestine. AUGUST 21—Traveled to Masada camp near Yassy. All here training for life in Palestine. Robust and dedicated, they must be allowed in. AUGUST 26—War will surely be declared in a few days and the situation here has already worsened for our fellow Jews. A solution must be found. SEPTEMBER 1—Met with Chief Rabbi Nemirower, whom I had seen two years ago. He is anxious about the fate of Jews here. I urged him to get the young people out, and we in Palestine would take care of them.

Her last entry, written after midnight on the morning of September 4, the day after she embarked for Palestine, concluded, "How can we save them? We must extricate as



REBECCA CUT  
UP A BEDSHEET  
AND SEWED IT  
INTO A FLAG  
WITH A SIX-  
POINTED STAR  
AND STRIPES,  
COLORING IT  
WITH A BLUE  
CRAYON.

many dependent children as can be provided for and bring them to our land."

Rebecca spent the remainder of the war period in Palestine, maintaining a residence in Jerusalem while working for social agencies and communal causes throughout the country. With her fellow countrymen, she lived under the shadow of Nazi attack, enduring the strict rationing of the British authorities.

After the war she experienced many of the events leading up to the creation of the State of Israel. In the winter of 1946, Rebecca attended the daily hearings of the Anglo-American Commission in Jerusalem. The following summer she was present when the United Nations Commission, UNSCOP, met at the YMCA in Jerusalem to determine the future of the Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land.

Early in May 1948, an American consular official knocked at the door of her apartment on Jabotinsky Street, near the present site of *Beit HaNasi*, the President's Residence. He urged her to leave Jerusalem immediately because of the expected outbreak of violence. Rebecca absolutely refused, telling him that she could not "abandon her brothers and sisters. I have waited my entire lifetime," she added, "to see the rebirth of a Jewish state. I do not intend to miss it!"

Her dramatic act on Friday, May 14, 1948 won for her a permanent place in the folk annals of the state-to-be. Desirous of flying the Magen David, the flag of the new Jewish state, Rebecca appeared to be hampered in her resolve. For the first two weeks in May, she had been unable to leave her apartment because it was under enemy fire from the nearby Katamon neighborhood and because she was physically impaired. Using her ration coupons, the neighbors had brought her food. Never one to be thwarted, Rebecca cut up a bedsheet and sewed it into a flag with a six-pointed star and stripes. For coloring she used what was at hand, a blue crayon. Now prepared, she waited for that historic moment.

Late on Friday afternoon, May 14, 1948, when she learned that David Ben Gurion had proclaimed the new



State of Israel, Rebecca went out on her porch, triumphantly raising her flag as the sun brilliantly set over the city of Jerusalem. She had become the Betsy Ross of Israel.

In 1951, her niece, Marcella Brenner, visited Rebecca in Jerusalem and was shown the flag that her Aunt Beck had lovingly made. Until her death in 1966, Rebecca proudly flew that flag each year on the celebration of Israel's Independence Day. The flag, preserved by friends, is still displayed in Jerusalem every few years as a tribute to her extraordinary patriotism. The first woman to graduate with a diploma from a school of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a pioneer in Palestine, and social activist on more than two continents, Rebecca Affachiner left her mark on American and Jewish life and the State of Israel.

#### SOURCES

Rebecca Affachiner's papers are catalogued and located in the Central Archives of the Jewish People on the campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Dalin, David G. and Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Making a Life, Building a Community: A History of the Jews of Hartford*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997.

Geffen, David. "United States Jews in Israel," *New Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel*. Ed. Geoffrey Wigoder. Madison: Herzl Press, 1 (1994): 1315.

Geffen, David. "A Vision Come True," Independence Day Supplement, *Jerusalem Post*. May 6, 1984, p. 11.



ITEMS *in the*  
EXHIBITION

1. Rebecca Affachiner's flag of Israel.  
Loan by Mr. Ezra Gorodesky of Jerusalem
2. Photographs  
Rebecca Affachiner in World War I uniform  
Rest Room, J.W.B. Hut, Forwarding Camp,  
Le Mans Area, June 1919  
Family photograph, Rebecca with her mother  
and two siblings  
Family photograph (ca. 1893, New York), Isaac  
and Fanny Y. Affachiner with their children  
Rebecca, Max, Lillian, Annie  
Rebecca Affachiner on leave in Cannes, 1919  
Rebecca and the flag she made  
Installation Banquet for Rebecca Junior  
Hadassah in Norfolk, Virginia, 1932-33
3. "Barbara in France," an autobiographical fictional  
story by Rebecca Affachiner (typescript)
4. Interview with Rebecca Affachiner by  
S. Joseph Birshtein. December 25, 1933
5. Articles in *Jerusalem Post* by David Geffen  
about Rebecca Affachiner and the birth of Israel  
in May 1948
6. Letter (typed letter, signed) from Rebecca to her niece,  
Marcella Brenner, Jerusalem, May 10, 1951,  
with clipping
7. Bust of Fanny Y. Affachiner, mother of Rebecca,  
by Rebecca Affachiner. Loan by Mrs. Abner Brenner



8. Portrait of Rebecca Affachiner.  
Loan by Mrs. Abner Brenner
9. A set of High Holiday Prayerbooks with handcarved  
wooden covers made by the artisans of the  
Bezalel Art School, Jerusalem, and presented by  
Rebecca Affachiner to Anna Geffen.  
Loan by Anna and Louis Geffen
10. Article in *Jerusalem Post* by David Geffen  
about Mrs. Abner Brenner
11. "Farewell to Rebecca Affachiner," by  
Anna (Birshtein) Geffen, January 1934

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